

German Foreign Policy toward the Visegrad Countries: Patterns of Integration in Central Europe

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German Foreign Policy toward the Visegrad Countries

Patterns of Integration in Central Europe

by Andrea Gawrich and Maxim Stepanov

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Summary

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Relations between Germany and the Visegrad Four (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) have undergone numerous changes since the fall of the Iron Curtain. For each country in the V4, the relationship with Germany has developed along different paths. Today, differences in outlook seem to be present on issues ranging from EU energy security to NATO's role in European security (on the eastern borders in particular). The recent Ukraine crisis is another instance of diverging attitudes. This twofold analysis describes, firstly, Germany's cooperation with the V4 as a whole, particularly its decisive role in shaping the countries' EU and NATO accession processes. Secondly, it investigates the bilateral agreements between Germany and the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, respectively, and examines these as instruments of German foreign policy. Our conclusion is that, because of unequal interests and differences of opinions, the V4 as a whole is less important to Germany than the sum of its individual bilateral relationships.

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German Foreign Policy toward the Visegrad Countries

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Introduction

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, relations between Germany and the Visegrad Four (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – have changed in numerous ways. Recently, in light of the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine, the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the EU decision to set up sanctions against Russia, and new energy security plans, Germany's relations with Poland in particular (but also with the Czech Republic and Slovakia) have become much closer. This has had a significant impact on the issue of EU energy security as well as on the role of the NATO in European security and on securing NATO's eastern borders.

Within the European Union, the Federal Republic of Germany has long been the most vocal advocate for a united Europe. Based on its geographic proximity to the former Eastern bloc and its sense of historical responsibility, Germany early on expressed its support for expanding the EU into Eastern Europe and favored EU reform processes that would enable the eastern enlargement of the Community in 2004. Likewise, Germany saw the expansion and increased importance of the EU as supporting factors for its European policy.¹

This analysis starts with a retrospective overview of V4 accession to the EU and NATO and Germany's role in this process. It then moves on to examine perspectives for further cooperation between Germany and the V4 within the enlarged EU. Finally, it offers tentative conclusions regarding possible future cooperation between Germany and the V4 within the EU.

1. Retrospective Overview

1.1 Historical Legacies, Constraints, and Responsibilities

German foreign policy toward partner countries in Eastern Europe and, in particular, Germany's advocacy of the EU's eastern enlargement, have been justified on the basis of two general paradigms. The first paradigm is Germany's sense of historical responsibility, which should be read as a constructivist approach to European norms based on responsibility for a shared and peaceful Europe. The second has been a more rationalist pursuit of political stability in and economic interconnectedness with Eastern Europe.²

Nonetheless, Germany's relationships with the Visegrad states have developed along different paths. Particularly in the cases of Poland and the Czech Republic, the intensified relationships between the V4 and Germany have been marked by the burden of Germany's historical legacy, during and beyond the EU accession process. In the early 1990s, Germany's relations with Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland were shaped to a great extent by bilateral agreements on neighborly cooperation. Accordingly, German foreign policy relating to the Visegrad states began by seeking a gateway to bilateralism. Bilateral agreements are rarely applied as instruments of German foreign policy. Thus Germany built formalized bilateral foundations with the V4 before subsuming this foreign policy within the larger European project.

The relationship between Germany and Poland has been highly dynamic over the past decade. After a degree of constant progress and even bilateral euphoria, the relationship worsened at the beginning of the new millennium after interest groups of Germans who had been expelled after World War II initiated a museum commemorating their expulsion and even started debates on restitutions again. This led to considerable tensions, especially after a 2004 resolution by the Sejm (the lower house of parliament) called upon the Polish government to initiate negotiations with Germany on war reparations. Even though this resolution did not ultimately have practical repercussions, it reopened historical wounds and placed a bilateral strain on the relationship. On the heels of the V4's EU accession, relations suffered a further setback starting in 2005. This was triggered by the Baltic Sea gas pipeline project, spearheaded by German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Russian president Vladimir Putin.³ However, when Donald Tusk became Polish prime minister in 2007, ties between Germany and Poland tightened once again. The closeness of the German-Polish working relationship within the Weimar Triangle was proven during the Ukraine crisis, beginning in the winter of 2013–14.

Despite substantial rapprochement with the Czech Republic, German-Czech tension arose in the 1990s due to expelled ethnic Germans demanding

compensation for assets that had been seized by the Czech Republic, while Czech victims of the Nazis in turn demanded compensation for their own losses. On top of that, an intense debate arose over the legal validity of the Beneš decrees, which had formed the legal foundation for the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War II. In 1997, after gradual rapprochement, the nations signed a German-Czech Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development, establishing the German-Czech Future Fund, in large part to compensate Czech victims of the Nazis.

The focal point of Germany's relationship with Slovakia in the 1990s was not so much historical issues as the question of how best to approach Vladimir Mečiar's authoritarian regime. Likewise, Germany's relationship with Hungary was not centered on historical legacies but was instead shaped in particular by German gratitude for the opening of Hungary's borders in 1989. Moreover, the German minority in Hungary did not pose an issue in bilateral relations.⁴ Nor has Germany been a leading critic of the recent democratic "backsliding" in the country.⁵

1.2 Germany and the EU's Eastern Enlargement

In the context of the EU's major eastern enlargement in 2004, Germany faced three fundamental issues that would determine the broad strokes of its European policy: widening versus deepening; net payments into the EU treasury versus financing integration; and finally, multilateralism versus self-interest. What made it possible to resolve this complexity was that Germany's contribution to the eastern enlargement was supported by general pan-European consensus, along with a bold desire on the part of the Visegrad countries to integrate into Western political and security structures and to undergo the reform processes such integration would require.⁶

The EU offered the Central European countries strong incentives. These began with the signing of the first cooperation agreements shortly after the end of the Cold War.⁷ The agreements were signifi-

cantly bolstered by the prospects of accession. At the same time, the EU stipulated that the countries adopt the common legal framework, the *aquis communautaire*, which was evaluated as a second transition of these countries.

During the EU enlargement, German foreign policy had two complex objectives: deepening integration within the EU and enlarging the EU itself. These two objectives needed to be reconciled in the multilateral context without being conditionally linked. After all, the EU-15 included states (such as France) that were interested in deepening integration but did not necessarily favor eastern enlargement, as well as states (such as the UK) that had the opposite preference and strongly advocated eastern expansion while distancing themselves from further integration.

In Germany, too, contradictory interests needed to be resolved in order to keep controversial issues from delaying the accession negotiations. The aforementioned discussions surrounding the Beneš decrees played an undeniable role in German domestic politics during the late accession phase. (The Beneš decrees provided a legal basis for the expulsion of the German population from the Sudetenland; ratified in 1946, they were and remain part of Czech law and continue to be a subject fervid social debate.⁸) Edmund Stoiber, then longstanding minister-president of Bavaria as well as chairman of the Christian Social Union (CSU), called for their annulment in 2002.⁹ In doing so, he became a spokesman for those Germans who had been forced to leave areas that had been part of Germany until World War II. If the repeal of the Beneš decrees had been required by Germany as part of the package deal in exchange for EU accession, it would have been fatal to the entire project of eastern enlargement, not least because the population in Poland also feared that “the *vertriebene*” (German expellees) would petition for the return of their former property, especially in those parts of Poland bordering Germany. This served as a primary cause of skepticism in Poland regarding EU accession.¹⁰

In the German Bundestag from 1990 on, almost every party present supported the EU’s eastward expansion. The notable exception was the CSU in Bavaria. Although it did not reject eastern enlargement outright, the CSU stressed the need to take special care in evaluating EU applicants’ readiness for accession. Generally, however, German political parties as well as the federal states actively cooperated to shape Germany’s European policy regarding eastern enlargement. For instance, some federal states helped to develop “twinning” projects – initiatives intended to strengthen the capacities of candidate states’ bureaucracies.

Although the German federal states campaigned for EU accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – as shown by a German Länder Decision as early as February 1993¹¹ – eastern enlargement entailed obvious resource conflicts between the structurally weak regions of the former East Germany and the candidate states. For example, the federal states of the former East Germany were increasingly in competition with CEE countries over EU cohesion funding. This resulted in disputes with the EU Commission during negotiation of the EU financial framework. Saxony, for instance, filed a lawsuit against the EU Commission over a canceled subsidy package. Basically, the German government took a hardline position on financial aspects of the enlargement, but supported Poland’s goal concerning EU funding.¹²

1.3 German Attitudes toward EU Integration of the Visegrad Four

As early as the 1990 European Summit in Dublin, intentions were expressed to negotiate treaties of association with all CEE countries. Only three years later, at the 1993 summit in Copenhagen, did EU member states reach the general consensus that integrating the CEE states into the European Community would be in keeping with its guiding principle of a peaceful and prosperous Europe.

Once the first accession negotiations with the Central European countries were underway, the majority of the German public supported a near-term eastern enlargement, sharing the view that accession was in Germany’s strategic interest. During the

preparatory process that began in 1998, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party government led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer was guided by domestic pragmatism. It was necessary to strike a balance between numerous interests in the various stages of accession negotiations.

Although consensus over eastern enlargement had been reached in the early 1990s, there were nonetheless contentious debates in German society regarding the process. In the first half of the 1990s, German approval for the process was comparatively high. Poles responded to this positive attitude with relief and, accordingly, perceived Germany as an advocate of Polish interests in the EU.¹³ Yet after accession in 2004, public opinion took what at first seems to be a paradoxical turn. Sentiment became less pro-European. Peter Becker describes it thus:

The overall consensus on European policy that had been shared by all parties, associations, and interest groups – along with the vast majority of Germans – had subsided and given way to a circumspect or even skeptical attitude toward the European integration process. The permissive consensus eroded and was replaced with a matter-of-factness that was guided by self-interest and generally more skeptical. Germans' general attitude toward Europe transformed from "staunchly pro-European" to "dispassionate support," "indifference," or even "disenchantment."¹⁴

The rising discomfort in Germany came from fears of unbridled migration, a fear stoked by specific interest groups. The German government felt compelled to respond, for example with transitional regulations negotiated by the Schröder government regarding the freedom of movement for workers.

Overall, German attitudes were shaped less by a perception of the V4 as a group than by perception of each of the four countries individually. Hungarian accession had the highest rate of approval in Germany, followed closely by the Czech Republic. Poland and Slovakia had significantly lower ratings. The overall trend was a decline in public approval. From 2002 to 2004, 10 to 15 percent of those Germans who had originally said they were undecided switched to opposing eastern

enlargement.¹⁵ Alongside the various disputes over the bilateral legacies of World War II (especially the tension with the Czech Republic over the Beneš decrees and the similar controversy with Poland over German expellees), the shared borders with Poland and the Czech Republic had a negative impact on public sentiment in the run-up to accession. Meanwhile, relations with Hungary – comparatively less affected by history – also benefited from the lack of a common border.

In general, the German approval rating of the EU enlargement was observably below the European average. As early as 1991, the Eurobarometer survey polled residents' visions of the future "architecture of Europe." Some 55 percent of respondents (from the EC-12 plus former East Germany) believed that certain countries from CEE such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia would be members of the European Community by the year 2000. Only 50 percent of West Germans shared this view, compared with 67 percent of East Germans. Opposition to accession was 28 percent on average across the EC-12+, whereas the views of West Germans in particular were even more skeptical. (Some 36 percent responded that those Eastern European countries would not be members of the European Community in the year 2000.¹⁶)

In the years 1998 and 2000, German approval ratings of EU enlargement was 36 percent, far below the average EU-15 rating of 44 percent.¹⁷ In 1998 Germans were thus about as skeptical as the French (35 percent approval of EU enlargement), Austrians (33 percent), and Belgians (32 percent).¹⁸ By 2000 Germans surveyed opposed European enlargement by 43 percent.¹⁹

In the EU-15, however, the Visegrad states were preferred to other Eastern European countries. In 1998 approval ratings for the accession of Hungary (52 percent), Poland (49 percent), the Czech Republic (48 percent), and Slovakia (43 percent) were higher than those for Bulgaria (42 percent), the Baltic States (41 percent each), and Slovenia and Romania (both 39 percent).²⁰ Only two years later, these approval ratings had all sunk, whereby relationally they remained the same.

In an opinion poll conducted by the European Commission in 2004, the results concerning the approval of the accession of the ten new member states showed that the approval ratings in Germany sank even further, reaching the lowest level in the EU-15. Only 28 percent of German surveyed supported European enlargement, with 56 percent against it.²¹

Public attitudes in Germany toward the eastern enlargement of the EU have been marked by skepticism. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Germany's approval of eastern enlargement was consistently below that of the European community as a whole.

1.4 Germany and NATO Enlargement

The second path toward integration into the West was the accession of the CEE countries into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These countries had a desire for collective security stemming from the Soviet Union's former political dominance and military interventions, historical factors that had long formed an important part of national identity. Since both international organizations – the European Community and NATO – were established in the same postwar political context, integration into the EU and into NATO were logically considered together. Membership in both organizations was therefore a goal of many Eastern European politicians and was part of the EU-15 negotiations. Consequently, both accession procedures took place at the same time. However, the adaption pressure of NATO was not as comprehensive as for the EU.

Most of the German government's reasons for pushing NATO's eastern enlargement were strategic. For one thing, Germany would thus geographically move from the eastern border to the center of Europe, providing it with increased security. Secondly, as a direct neighbor of CEE countries, Germany had a great interest in their economic and political stability. Lastly, economic upswing in the CEE countries would most certainly benefit Germany as a trade partner.²²

Developments in the CEE countries also posed new challenges to NATO and redefined its tasks. The political scientist Gunter Hellmann predicted that NATO would remain a “community of values” for Germany long after the end of the Cold War and that it would increase in importance as a political organization, since it could play a central role for European security after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Germany therefore supported NATO's new strategic concept in 1991, in particular the goal of strengthening NATO's political functions.²³

Already at the 1990 NATO summit, Helmut Kohl's government had spoken out in favor of establishing diplomatic relations with the Warsaw Pact countries. Subsequently, Germany and the US initiated the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and the Partnership for Peace Program. Germany also endorsed NATO enlargement at the December 1993 meeting of the NATO council.²⁴ In 1994, an agreement on military and security questions was reached between NATO and the Visegrad countries, amounting to a prelude to accession. In 1997, NATO began accession negotiations with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which concluded in 1999.²⁵

The steps taken by the German government to reach this end clearly show that Germany welcomed the institutional integration of the former Warsaw Pact states into NATO. With the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, the goal was largely reached. NATO's second eastern enlargement took place in 2004, when Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania joined, along the fourth Visegrad country: Slovakia. This marked the end of Slovakia's political isolation, which had been characterized by Vladimir Mečiar's rather autocratic regime between 1992 and 1998.²⁶

In the early 1990s fundamental fears were in fact voiced in Germany regarding NATO's eastern enlargement. Public discourse centered on three aspects in particular. First, Russia might feel threatened by eastern enlargement; second, strengthening NATO could prevent Europe's emancipation from the US; and third, political commentators in particular championed strengthening the OSCE and,

accordingly, demilitarizing Europe. In contrast to the expressed preference of the German foreign ministry, however, the German minister of defense at the time, Volker R  he, favored strengthening NATO.²⁷

2. Perspectives

2.1 Germany and the Visegrad Four as EU Members: Areas of Cooperation and (Lack of) Coordination

Ten years after eastern enlargement, Germany's central European neighbors all have equally close economic relationships with Germany, but their political views and strategies regarding the EU and overall cooperation diverge greatly. Neither the Visegrad countries as a group nor the political elites in each country had a sound agenda for what would come after accession in 2004. At least the EU as a whole and Germany in particular had an overall goal, namely to provide an improved legal basis for the larger EU by putting the Treaty of Lisbon into effect. However, there was little agreement and much less clarity on the future of the EU after 2004. It was not even possible to identify a common vision. Some spoke of a "two-speed Europe," others of "Europe    la carte." A lack of vision among German politicians was the object of particular criticism.²⁸

Having achieved EU membership, the V4 countries justifiably expected that the paternalism of the EU-15 would come to an end. But this expectation was not met, due to the concerns of German and Austrian politicians.²⁹ These, responding to their constituencies, feared that the free movement of labor and open borders would lead to a high number of migrants, competitive disadvantages, and a substantial loss of jobs held by German and Austrian citizens. As a result of these discussions, each member state was allowed to establish transitional regulations limiting the free movement of labor until May 2011, when freedom of mobility came into full legal effect. This political decision severely undermined the self-confidence of the CEE countries. The term "second-class member" was coined.

Indeed, the skepticism about the European project that has been observed in the CEE countries over the past ten years stands in clear contrast to the single-minded focus on integration into the EU that was palpable in the years before accession.

Relations between the V4 and Germany became far more complex after EU enlargement. On the one hand, Germany handed over its position as mediator between Eastern and Western countries to the V4 member countries. On the other hand, the evident and ongoing transatlantic orientation of the V4 remained puzzling to the Germans, not only with regard to security issues. The economic crisis, which started four years after EU enlargement, turned Germany into a leading actor in the deepening of eurozone commitments and in overall economic cooperation in the EU. It should be recalled that Slovakia is the only V4 country currently in the eurozone. For its part, Poland is pursuing entry into the eurozone, but the Czech Republic and Hungary are not. This means that German leadership affects the V4 countries to various degrees.

2.2 Economic Cooperation between Germany and the Visegrad Countries

Immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Germany saw the promise of economic cooperation with CEE countries. Potentially low production and labor costs and the presence of skilled workers were seen as a plus. From an economic point of view, increased trade between Germany and the V4 countries already before 2004 made EU enlargement a logical next step of European integration, since Germany's economic model depends on exports. At the same time, it was expected that the central European countries would in turn benefit from increased international trade and German direct investments. However, it was expected that to ensure economic stability and prosperity, further economic instruments would be needed in the V4 countries in the long term.

2.2.1 Trade relations in the 1990s

Germany became a central trade partner for the CEE countries in the 1990s, and trade relations soon soared. For example, German exports to

Czechoslovakia rose by 166 percent between 1989 and 1992, and imports rose by 173 percent. Between 1993 and 1995, German trade with the CEE states increased 30 percent.³⁰ Obviously, at an initial point, political integration was not required to stimulate trade relations between Germany and its eastern neighbors.

The economic conditions in Germany and the V4 were well suited to the exchange of goods. This was especially true for mechanical engineering, an area in which production of parts was shifted to East Central Europe early on. Germany in turn exported products in the areas of mechanical, electrical, and automotive and transport engineering. This went hand in hand with a high level of investments undertaken by German companies, which invested up to 40 percent in joint ventures that in turn were supported by state investment support schemes. In Czechoslovakia, as an example, the percentage of foreign direct investments was as high as 86 percent in 1990.³¹

2.2.2 Trade relations after European enlargement

After the V4 countries' accession to the EU, economic relations between Germany and the V4 countries remained grossly asymmetrical, mostly due to the size of Germany's economy in comparison to those of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Currently, up to 30 percent of the V4 countries' external trade is with Germany, making Germany their top trade partner by far. In 2012, 25 percent of Poland's external trade (both imports and exports) was with Germany; for the Czech Republic it was 30 percent; 20 percent for Slovakia; and 25 percent for Hungary.³² Commodity flows between Germany and the CEE countries have risen considerably since they joined the EU in 2004. Data from the German office of federal statistics show that the external trade volume with Poland has more than doubled since 2004, from 34.7 billion euros to 75.7 billion euros. Commodities worth 64.7 billion euros were exchanged with the Czech Republic in 2012, as opposed to 34.8 billion euros in 2004. The increase in trading volume was not quite so dramatic for Hungary or Slovakia. However, since Germany began to build intensive economic relations with

the CEE countries in 1990, European enlargement did not lead to substantial changes but rather to the continuation and deepening of pre-existing relations.

Despite their relatively small economies (with the exception of Poland), the V4 countries have been able to place high in the rankings of countries importing to Germany. Poland is in eleventh place (with imports valuing 35.9 billion euros) and the Czech Republic is twelfth on the list (33 billion euros). Imports from Hungary rank sixteenth (19.5 billion euros), while Slovakia is in eighteenth place (12.2 billion euros). This places the Visegrad countries in the company of countries such as Spain (number 13 on the list), Norway (14), Japan (15), and Sweden (17).

The Visegrad countries are similarly important to Germany in terms of exports. In 2013, Poland was eighth on the list of countries to which Germany exports (42.4 billion euros), the Czech Republic was thirteenth (31 billion euros), Hungary sixteenth (17.5 billion euros), and Slovakia was number 21 on the list (10.7 billion euros).³³

In contrast, foreign direct investments are not symmetrical. Germany is by far the most important investor in each of the V4 countries, while CEE investments in Germany have a much lower volume. The table below demonstrates this.³⁴

Figure 1: Direct Investments Germany–V4

	German Direct Investments (Million Euros)	Direct Investments in Germany
Poland	21.533	498
Czech Republic	24.099	258
Hungary	17.382	73
Slovakia	8.766	n.a.

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011

German foreign investments in the Visegrad countries have continually risen since 1990, even if this development has not been quite as consistent as in external trade, particularly when the individual countries are considered separately. But fluctuations can be explained by the fact that direct invest-

ments often take place in large projects. In the past decade there has been a rise in German direct investments, connected to the V4's EU accession.

During their first ten years in the EU, we can observe two tendencies within the V4 countries. On one hand, they profit from the single market and from close relations with Germany. On the other hand, the importance of these relations and a general dependence on exports make their economies vulnerable to external movements, as the financial crisis clearly demonstrated. Poland was the only EU country that has been able to consistently show economic growth during the financial crisis, thanks to its large and stable national economy.

2.3 German Fears and Migration: The Free Movement of Labor

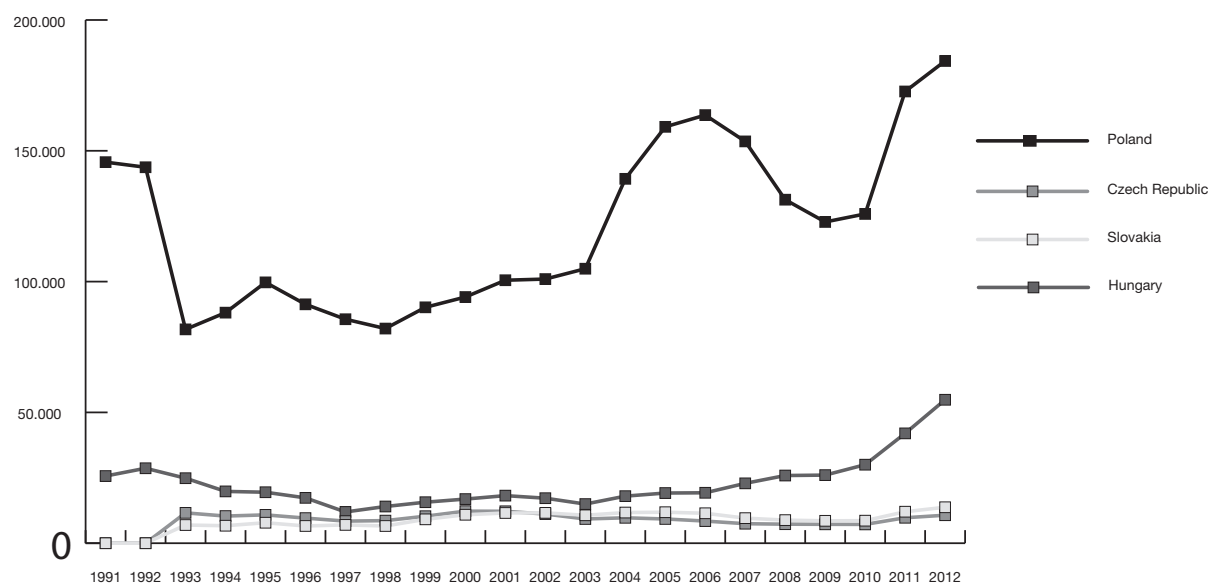
The free movement of labor was one of the most controversial issues among EU member states after the 2004 enlargement. A central element of the EU single market, it became a considerable psychological factor for the German and Austrian public, which feared large numbers of migrants. As a result, the German federal government under Gerhard Schröder negotiated the aforementioned exceptions and transitional regulations. Germany

was able to force the EU Commission to address this matter, and transitional phases were put in place until 2009 and 2011 respectively. Poland was the last Visegrad country to agree to these transitional regulations. Unlike Germany, some countries, including Great Britain, Ireland, and Sweden, opened their labor markets immediately.³⁵

Not only was the free movement of labor an issue in the first years after the Cold War. So was general migration between Germany and the V4. Figure 2 shows migration to Germany from the V4 countries. Migration patterns were by no means the same for all Visegrad countries. Incoming migration from Slovakia and the Czech Republic has remained fairly constant since 1993: between 6,000 and 13,000 people annually. There was a rise in Hungarian migration to Germany starting in 2006; numbers have risen slightly since 2011 and 2012 with the opening of the German labor market.

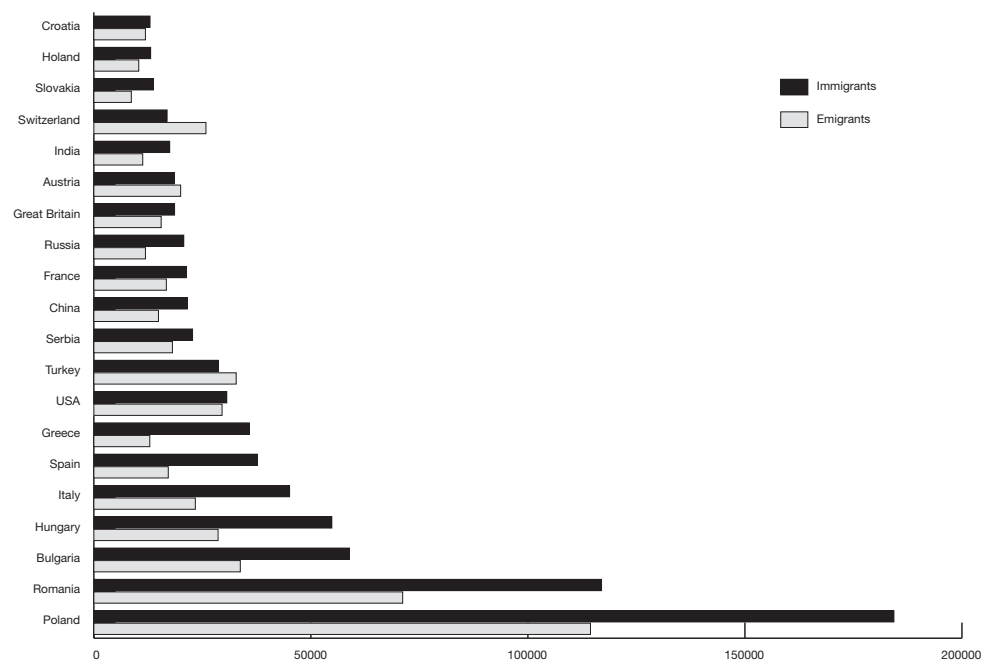
Migration from Poland since 1991 has been more dynamic. After a drop in migration in 1992, the number of immigrants remained relatively constant until 2003. Between 2003 (around 105,000 Polish migrants) and 2010 (around 126,000 Polish migrants), the number of incoming Polish migrants spiked briefly at more than 160,000 people. In

Figure 2: Migration to Germany by Country.



Source: Bundesministerium des Innern (2014): Migrationsbericht des Bundesamtes für Migration und Flüchtlinge im Auftrag der Bundesregierung, Migrationsbericht 2012, Nürnberg.

Figure 3: Migration to Germany by Country.



Source: Bundesministerium des Innern, Migrationsbericht 2012

2011 and 2012, the number of Polish migrants was around 172,000 and 184,000 people respectively. Opening the German labor market did not, however, lead to an extreme rise in migration from Poland.³⁶

Figure 3 shows migration flows to and from Germany in 2012. The Visegrad countries rank first (Poland), fourth (Hungary), and twentieth (Slovakia) among the countries from which people come to Germany. The Czech Republic is further down the list. Poland and Hungary are of particular interest in this regard, especially since the current debate on migration in Germany (which is often more populist than it is realistic), focuses mostly on Romania and Bulgaria.³⁷

Since the German labor market opened completely for workers from eight CEE countries in May 2011, the number of new immigrants has been much lower than expected. (The German government estimated that there would be 150,000 immigrants from CEE countries in the first year, while the Cologne Institute for Economic Research predicted up to 800,000 labor migrants in the first two years.) But in May 2012, one year after the labor market

opened, only 79,000 workers had emigrated from CEE countries.³⁸ This shows that popular German fears were in fact ungrounded, although societal attitudes had been instrumental in shaping Germany's vehement demands for bundling transitional regulations into EU enlargement.

2.4 Germany Benefits from East Central European Leadership: The Case of European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership Policies

Fifteen years ago German European policy followed two parallel strategies: EU enlargement and deepening integration. These two areas have moved further and further apart in the past ten years. The success of eastern enlargement in 2004 gave rise to many expectations in the countries neighboring the EU as well as in the new member states. Naturally, the enlargement meant that the EU's circumference became larger. The EU's declared openness to admitting more countries caused uncertainty among the general public within the member states. Many member states expressed great reservations about this move into the unknown. A new fundamental conflict arose between EU enlargement

and EU neighborhood policy. Two main questions emerged: Which countries could realistically be offered the prospect of accession? And what other instruments might the EU develop to forge closer relations to neighboring states without offering EU membership? The answer was to decouple integration and accession.

Further steps toward enlargement and other cooperative relationships were, after 2004, to be put on the back burner in favor of privileged relationships under the aegis of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This policy was introduced in May 2004 immediately after enlargement. This new instrument had two main aims: to stabilize the EU's neighbors on their path toward "Europeanization" and at the same time to concede the EU's own limitations. The ENP therefore explicitly did not contain any promise of future accession to the EU. This was meant to take off the pressure of enlargement options from EU neighborhood policy. However, the effectiveness of this political instrument was also thus weakened considerably.

The complexity of this project very soon became apparent. The periphery of the EU is very large, and the countries on the EU's borders are very diverse. Furthermore, the EU countries themselves have very different priorities. (For Germany, the V4 countries are the most important partners; for Sweden, the Eastern European countries in general are the most important partners; for southern countries such as France or Italy, the EU's Mediterranean neighbors have the greatest relevance both as economic partners and in terms of political stability.)

These divergent interests within the EU led to a division of the ENP in 2007. During its EU Council Presidency in 2007, Germany pursued its Eastern European policy with an initiative entitled "ENP plus." In response, France initiated the Union for the Mediterranean. This differentiation of ENP aimed to dispel criticism of a lack of EU commitment to its neighbors.

In 2008, even the member states themselves found the ENP was "mixed at best."³⁹ As a further step, bilateral treaties were negotiated with Eastern

European countries wishing to accede to the EU that went beyond the partnership and cooperation treaties signed in the late 1990s. Firstly, the regionalization of ENP was to include more economic integration and, secondly, parts of EU law, the *acquis communautaire*, was to be extended to the neighboring countries.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) that finally evolved out of the ENP reform process in 2008 was a compromise meant to achieve closer relationships with the EU without offering EU membership to the countries involved. What the ENP and later the EaP inherited from eastern enlargement were the principle of conditionality and the logic of an asymmetrical, paternalistic relationship ("take it or leave it"). What was new, however, was the effort made by Germany and the majority of the EU member states to avoid finality at all costs. The Visegrad countries at first held a contrary position and saw further eastern enlargement as a mid-term option,⁴⁰ but they bowed to the pressure of the majority of member states.⁴¹

The EU's advance into the unknown, as was said, is an example of how ENP, for fear of overextending itself, concentrated rather shortsightedly on individual countries without focusing on the macro-region of Eastern Europe as a whole. The EaP encouraged the neighboring countries to see these partnerships as an either-or alternative between integration with Russia or with the EU. There was little to counter the uncertainty of many countries regarding future prospects for Europeanization, while Russia employed diverse means to undermine the EaP's success.

Since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine of 2004, and again after the introduction of the EaP in 2008, tensions between Russian and EaP partner countries have increased markedly. The EU's eastern neighbors have not become more stable as a result of the partnerships. Nor have there been economic advantages for these countries or for the EU member states. The current political crises in relations between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and the EU are fundamentally putting the ENP into question.

With integration into the EU, the Visegrad group was able to develop new foreign policy aims. It, too,

looked toward its eastern neighbors, where a series of “colored revolutions” were beginning to change the political landscape and open the path toward political reforms, particularly in Ukraine (2004) but also in Georgia (2003). These peaceful revolutions were, indeed, taking place in close geographical proximity to the EU.

Although Germany was among those countries that shaped EaP, the Visegrad countries in particular, and other central European countries as well, spoke out repeatedly for closer relationships with the rest of Eastern Europe. Surprisingly, it was Poland (with Swedish support) that proposed the Eastern Partnership in the end. The reasons for this can be found in the differences between Germany’s Eastern European policies and the attitudes present in the Visegrad countries. Germany – despite its traditional interest in a closer partnership with Eastern Europe – was against extending EU membership to more Eastern European countries, while the countries of the V4 were committed to offering an EU perspective to their reform-oriented neighbors.

Poland’s greatest diplomatic success could well be the foundation of the EaP. At any rate, this was preceded by a long learning process. Poland’s first EU initiatives failed quickly, as they were not well prepared or coordinated with other member states.⁴² For example a Polish proposal for a kind of “energy NATO,” in which member states would protect one another against blackouts and thus increase energy security, was mostly ignored in the EU system and quickly disappeared from the agenda.⁴³ A second Polish proposal, a “square roots” system for weighting European Council votes, suffered a similar fate. With no support for his proposal, the Polish president of the time, Lech Kaczyński, tried to force his hand with less than diplomatic means, such as threatening a veto at negotiations for the Lisbon Treaty.⁴⁴ This unconstructive stance was exhibited again in 2006–07, when Poland put in a veto for beginning EU negotiations with Russia because Russia had put a temporary stop on Polish meat imports.⁴⁵

These experiences in EU institutions initiated a change in Poland’s European policy. Donald Tusk’s liberal-conservative government banked on

compromise and negotiations and consequently prepared the EaP with the greatest care. Poland needed to find supporters among the EU-15 before bringing its proposal to the table. It supported France’s proposal for a Mediterranean Union in order to secure France’s loyalty. Polish leadership also realized the importance of acting with the majority of EU member states and thus abandoned discussions about EU membership for Ukraine. At the same time, Poland, holding the Visegrad presidency in 2008–09, saw that decision-making processes within the V4 were difficult and also full of compromises. For this reason, the V4 format was of only limited use to the initiative for an EaP. As Martin Dangerfield put it:

The mechanics of drafting common V[isegrad] G[roup] strategy papers for the ENP tend to be rather protracted and beset by bureaucratic procedures and diplomatic issues which make for haggling over fine detail and insistence that national stances are reflected. The April 2007 “Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy” was arguably something of a rather bland, “compromise” text containing mainly already well-rehearsed positions rather than any far-reaching novel solutions. Frustration with a slow process and competitive tendencies can mean partners may prefer to keep “big ideas” back from collective diplomacy and present them as triumphs of national diplomacy. These difficulties also seem to indicate that the V[isegrad] G[roup] is not capable of fast collective detailed policy responses when windows of opportunity such as the Sarkozy Mediterranean Union initiative (which obviously helped pave the way for the E[uropean] P[artnerships]) present themselves.⁴⁶

But the integration of other CEE countries took form soon after. In November 2008, the V4 issued a common declaration with Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania containing concrete goals and a blueprint for the European Partnership Policy. Germany consciously left the design of the EaP to the new member states, but it did support the initiative in the Council of the European Union. In 2009, the Czech Republic took over presidency of the EU Council and gave the EaP decisive support. The Czech Republic managed to allot 600 million euros to the Eastern Partnership, almost double the original budget.⁴⁷

Although the Visegrad countries had promised to focus on EU neighborhood policy (declaring that the Visegrad group was “ready to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and expertise”⁴⁸), the V4 countries were in fact only able to transfer limited resources. This was due to difficult decision-making processes in the EU, a lack of financial resources, and adversity from Russia. Competitive tendencies within the Visegrad group also took their toll. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary all claimed responsibility for furthering democracy and human rights but were not able to coordinate these issues among themselves.⁴⁹

National interests and bilateral relationships with Russia also caused divisions in terms of EU policy toward the EaP countries. The EU member states with close relationships with Russia “consider[ed] Russia to be too important a global player to let the EU lead in relations.”⁵⁰ This attitude has shifted slightly in the past decade but remains relevant. The Visegrad group itself was also often divided in terms of each country’s own Eastern policies.⁵¹ Numerous controversies kept the V4 from acting with more resolve and united resources – both internal and with the rest of the EU.

Indeed, EU activity in Eastern Europe has been unable to meet its goal: stability and economic growth for the countries bordering the EU. From a German perspective, the development of the ENP brought with it an interesting shift of focus within the EU. After the accession of countries who had a genuine interest in ENP (that is, interest that was much stronger than Germany’s), Germany was all too happy to leave this EU policy area to the new member states. These were able to set an ambitious agenda for the Eastern European states – an agenda that Germany itself would not have been able to achieve because of certain conflicts of interest with Russia. Germany would also be interested in a deeper EU-Russia policy. These policy advancements brought Germany and the V4 closer together, but had little effect on their sphere of action.

2.5 German European Leadership in the EU’s Economic Crisis Policy and the V4

The limits of the EU can be seen most clearly in an examination of the issue of a common currency. The European monetary union represents a “shared destiny,” as German Chancellor Angela Merkel once called it at the crisis summit of 2010. And in fact, the common currency was a strong force behind integration and behind new laws such as the fiscal package aimed at controlling national budget policies. The financial crisis thus accelerated the integration of the eurozone countries. For the other EU member states, however, the speed of integration has been slower. Within the Visegrad countries, attitudes toward the euro mirror the notion of “two-speed Europe” – a popular concept that illustrates the differences in European integration. Slovakia introduced the euro in 2009, while Poland (although it has expressed interest in a common currency for many years) will not reach this goal in the short term. The Czech Republic only signaled openness to the euro in 2014. And Hungary’s government under Viktor Orbán’s leadership rejects the introduction of the euro any time in the near future.⁵²

Germany has pursued various forms of cooperation to include non-eurozone members as well, for example the Euro Plus Pact of 2011. Poland is a member of this pact, but the Czech Republic and Hungary are not.

A “two-speed Europe,” however, cannot function in all policy areas. In many areas, the EU requires the agreement of all members to succeed. Furthermore, issues such as transport, energy supply, and environmental protection do not end at the borders of the member states. In this regard Germany must also answer the question of whether multilateralism can function on the European level. During the eurozone crisis, Germany and sometimes France took on strong leadership roles that were previously unprecedented in the European Community. The political scientist Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet described Germany’s actions during the crisis as a necessity with far-reaching consequences: “A ‘directorium à la Merkozy’ may be useful in an emergency and can therefore be

tolerated, but it cannot be a blueprint for the future as it undermines the foundations of the integration that drives the community and in the long term amounts to the disenfranchisement of European partners.”⁵³

Yet the German position is volatile. It oscillates between taking steps to preserve national control on the one hand and working on the other to enhance intergovernmental coordination within the eurozone, as evidenced by its current position on the banking union or the German-French paper of May 2013. At any rate, there is rhetorical commitment to a genuine political union in the future. The perpetual balancing act gives the Visegrad countries some latitude to nudge Germany’s European policy toward the latter.⁵⁴

2.6 Current Legitimacy: German Public Opinion of the Visegrad Countries

German attitudes toward the V4 countries changed somewhat after eastern enlargement. Of the four countries, Poland is Germany’s largest and nearest neighbor (measured by the length of shared border). The burden of history between the two countries is heavy. After German reunification, both countries had to rethink and redefine their new relationship. The Allensbach Institute conducted a meta-analysis of forty years of public opinion surveys of German-Polish relations. The analysis focused in particular on the dynamics of how Germans and Poles saw one another after the fall of the Iron Curtain. While Germany was perceived by Poland as a source of latent danger in the early 1990s – when worries about recognition of the Oder-Neisse line were at the fore of public discourse – this fear shifted to a positive image of Germans as a force behind European integration and in support of Poland’s European future. In the early 1990s, Germany’s view of Poland was mostly negative and linked to stereotypes of petty crime, backwardness, and excessive religious fervor. Both sides stressed the burden of history. For some time, feelings of distance and estrangement had dominated relations between these nations. But more than twenty years later, Germans and Poles have an increasingly nuanced image of one another, as an Allensbach Institute survey states: “In recent years

in particular, Germans again have a more positive opinion of Poles.... Positive answers to the question of typical Polish characteristics have increased significantly.”⁵⁵

Other studies that looked at public opinion of bilateral relations between Germany and the V4 countries have shown that there has been slow but steady improvement in German opinion since the early 1990s. On the whole, bilateral relations are deemed positive.⁵⁶ While reservations were expressed in the past about the eastern enlargement of the EU, in 2014, this question has long held little interest to the German population. And most Germans believe that security at the borders has increased since the Visegrad countries joined the EU.⁵⁷ More and more Germans visit their neighbors to the East, which works positively to improve the image of both countries. “Whoever knows their neighbors better also appreciates them more” – this is the conclusion of a study that also looked at Germans’ opinions of its eastern neighbors.⁵⁸

2.7 European Security after the Ukrainian Revolution

Recent events in Ukrainian politics have in particular strengthened relations among Poland, Germany, and France and for a short time revitalized the Weimar Triangle. The foreign ministers of all three countries were involved in negotiations between the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition, and they have provided a cornerstone of support for political change in Ukraine. This has not, however, been subsequently transferred into an increased importance of the Visegrad group in the EU’s Eastern European policy.

This may partly be explained by the fact that the Polish government was going through a phase of domestic distrust and had to initiate a vote of confidence after a scandal involving unauthorized interception of communications. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the V4 countries pursued different strategic approaches. While Poland has asked for a permanent NATO presence on its soil, the Czech Republic does not for its part favor hosting NATO troops.⁵⁹

From the onset of the crisis in Ukraine, the German government failed to present a unified front. While the new German minister of defense, Ursula von der Leyen, promised a more active German role and expressed solidarity with the Eastern EU member states, the foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, put less emphasis on NATO and more on the OSCE and on keeping channels of dialogue with Russia open.⁶⁰ Consequently, joint V4-German strategies are not to be expected in the near future.

2.8 European Energy Security and the Visegrad Four

Without doubt, the issue of energy security has been one of the most controversial concerns between Germany and Poland in the past decade. Poland has been largely disappointed by the German Nordstream Pipeline initiative, which was the result of the political friendship between Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin.⁶¹ Now, with gas increasingly becoming a tool of Russian pressure on Ukraine, the framing conditions have changed substantially. As a consequence, Poland unilaterally began to motivate EU partners to create an energy union. Poland is extremely vulnerable in its energy relations. Prime Minister Tusk's core idea is "for the EU to jointly negotiate gas contracts with Russia" and "for the European Commission to play a role in all future energy talks with Moscow."⁶²

In contrast to its earlier proposal of an "Energy NATO," Poland may be more successful with this initiative. On one hand, the German member of the EU Commission who was responsible for energy issues until 2014, Günther Oettinger, supports the idea of a unitary gas price for all EU member countries.⁶³ On the other hand, it is more and more evident that contracts with Gazprom show obstacles of compliance with EU law.

Consequently, the V4 group is following a two-track approach with regard to energy security. The fact that the V4 recently asked the US to remove bureaucratic hurdles to exporting US shale gas to the region offers further proof of the seriousness of the goal of diversifying energy sources and cutting dependency on Russia.⁶⁴

Conclusions

The eastern enlargement of 2004 has proven to be a successful move on the part of the EU. Although Germany actively supported fast-track accession of the CEE countries, it also supported its own financial interests within the EU. By actively shaping EU policy, the V4 countries strove to find their position within the EU system. Many common interests – but also differences of opinion – between Germany and the V4 countries have been revealed during the complex EU decision-making procedures. The past ten years have shown that, for Germany, the Visegrad coalition plays a lesser role as a whole than do bilateral relationships between Germany and each of the four countries. The individual interests of the Visegrad countries in different political questions simply diverge too greatly. But there are areas – in particular the Eastern Partnership – that affect Germany and the V4 countries equally and thus encourage closer cooperation. Germany also needs active dialogue with the Visegrad countries on questions of climate and energy policy. No consensus will be possible on the EU level unless the national interests of the individual Visegrad countries are taken into account.

The V4 countries are all aware that they benefitted from Germany's leading role during the financial and economic crisis. This has improved the relationship between the V4 and Germany. As Michał Simecka put it: "One possible consequence of changing attitudes toward Germany could be the emergence of a durable coalition."⁶⁵ Simecka assumes that this could even counterweight the role of France, for although "Angela Merkel can always turn to France to deepen eurozone coordination, she lacks a comparably powerful partner with whom to walk in the direction of inclusive federalization. This is a role that the Visegrad group – whose collective voting weight equals Germany and France combined – might aspire to. "Compared to France," Simecka writes, "they could offer greater support for Germany's economic vision, including more intrusive policing of national fiscal prudence. In return, they should demand German support for inclusiveness of EU policies and commensurate empowerment of community institutions."⁶⁶ This could be regarded as a "grand bargain" between Germany and the V4 countries and would give a broader integration scenario a chance.

As this paper has noted, however, consensus among the V4 is cost-intensive and often reached slowly, particularly after the changes in Hungary's political landscape. A strategy of more systematically opening cooperation with external partners and going beyond existing coalitions, as was demanded by Germany, has been suggested for the

V4 as well. Proposals have been made to broaden cooperation, creating a "V4-plus" format with the Baltic States in particular.⁶⁷ With regard to recent security issues, this could potentially become a format for security cooperation but may be less suited to the broad range of domestic EU policy fields.

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Notes

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- 4 Michael Dauderstädt, "Mittel und Osteuropa," in *ibid.*, pp. 422–35.
- 5 "Ungarns Regierungschef: Orbán bedankt sich bei Merkel," *Spiegel Online*, May 8, 2014 <<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ungarn-regierungschef-orban-dankt-merkel-a-968398.html>> (accessed July 15, 2014).
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- 27 Von Bredow, *Außenpolitik Deutschland*, pp. 218–19.
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- 29 This has frequently been argued on the grounds of geographic proximity and common borders, though these are in fact of very little relevance for labor migration. In Germany especially, the CSU has taken up the cause on the "fight against poverty Immigration."
- 30 Martin Jerabek, *Deutschland und die Osterweiterung der EU* (Wiesbaden, 2011).
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 89 ff.
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- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Csaba Törő, Eamonn Butler, and Károly Gruber, “Visegrad: The Evolving Pattern of Coordination and Partnership after EU Enlargement,” *Journal: Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 3 (March 2014), pp. 364–93.

